NEW LITERARIA-
An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities
Volume 8, No. 1, March, 2026, PP. 32-38
ISSN: 2582-7375
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2026.v08i1.005
www.newliteraria.com

The Crisis in Spatial/Material Belonging/s in Narendranath Mitra's "The Four-Poster Bed": The Idiom of Loss and Rupture in 1947 Partition

Rajib Das
PhD Research Scholar, Bankura University, Department of English, West Bengal

Abstract

The traumatic history of the world is riddled with flux, not with fixities, with transitional turbulence, not with an undisrupted state of existential reality. The psycho-social crisis, as a response to the fracture of collective identity embodied in a subject, may be linked to the traumatic rupture caused by an emerging conflict marked by migration and displacement. The space of belonging, nurtured in the psychic imagination of a subject, is a product of interrelations and co-existence with the spatiality which is part of them. Such an intertwined sense of belonging is violated in Rajmohan, a representative of the landed gentry and an upper-class Hindu, in Narendranath Mitra's short story "The Four-Poster Bed". He appears to be an eccentric character in the story as he, unlike many upper-caste Hindus, did not leave behind his *vite* (foundational home) in East Pakistan amid the looming crisis set in the aftermath of the 1947 Partition. The paper seeks to examine the interaction between the spatial belonging and material belongings, the ontological disruption and the traumatic rupture of Rajmohan, illustrating his plight immediately after the Partition. It also throws light on a kind of crisis that portrays how he remains reluctant to relinquish the space of belonging in an altered geo-political reality. The paper also aims to deconstruct the *maan* (dignity) of the feudal class, which Rajmohan stands for, highlighting the interplay of class positions embedded in the social fabric at the time. The fragmented family vis-à-vis Rajmohan's rooted belonging also foregrounds the argument of this paper.

Keywords: Partition, Belonging, Spatial, Ontological, Trauma.

Introduction:

The Partition of India in 1947 is a colossal historical event that resulted in the tectonic shift of the South Asian geopolitical landscape, affecting public and political discourses, appropriating or re-appropriating its historical context and consequences in the post-Partition period to date. The high politics regarding the British colonial role, the major actors behind the political decision-making of the Partition, as well as the question of vested interest of the prominent

Article History: Received: 30 November 2026. Revised: 15 February 2026. Accepted: 17 January 2026. First published: 01 March, 2026.

Copyright: © 2026 by the *author/s*.

License: Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Published by: Adrija Press, India.
Citation: Das, Rajib. (2026). The Crisis in Spatial/Material Belonging/s in Narendranath Mitra's "The Four-Poster Bed": The Idiom of Loss and Rupture in 1947 Partition. *Newliteraria Journal* 8:1, 32-38. https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2026.v08i1.005

parties of the time, mainly the Congress and the Muslim League, have been a long-standing historical engagement down the years. In such a historical treatment of the event like the Partition, the dynamic of human cost closely connected with it- which remained sidelined in the official history of the Partition- resurfaced through the increasing engagement with literary narratives, memoirs, or oral narratives on the Partition. The Partition in 1947, for its complex socio-cultural, political and religious entanglements, could be partially apprehended if these narratives are not taken into account. Gyanendra Pandey underlines a subtle difference between "historian's history" and "the survivors account" in particular reference to the Partition; he points out how "historian's history seems to suggest that what Partition amounted to was, in the main, a new constitutional/political arrangement," whereas "the survivors" account would appear to say that it amounted to a sundering…a radical reconstitution of community and history (2001, p. 7). Like these testimonies, the function of literary narratives is remarkably significant- as fiction "can give us simulacrum of the discontinuities inhabiting (and operating?) the ethico-epistemic and the ethico-political" (Spivak, 2019, p. 6) and these narratives can covert/overtly document "a sundering" (Pandey, 2001, p. 7), or the ruptures of the Partition.

The division of Indian sub-continent into India and Pakistan in 1947 was decided through the lines of demarcation "to be made in those Provinces where there was a roughly equal number of Muslims and non-Muslims" (Mosley, 1966, p. 219); two provinces had fallen in this category- Punjab, consisting of "something over 16,000,000 Muslims against 12,000,000 Sikhs and Hindus" (Mosley, 1966 p. 219), and Bengal consisting of "33,000,000 Muslims against 27,000,000 Hindus, Untouchables and Christians" (Mosley, 1966, p. 219). And other provinces having "sizeable but nowhere near equal minorities of Muslims or Hindus (such as the North West Frontier Province, Sind, Assam, Bihar and the Central Provinces) went automatically into the Dominion of the majority community…." (Mosley, 1966 p. 219). The herculean task of the lines of demarcation between India and Pakistan was entrusted to Sir Cyril Radcliffe by the British Government. The unusual haste with which the demarcation was done is quite intriguing, and it was arbitrarily done; he "arrived in Delhi on 8 July 1947. Independence Day was 15 August. Of India's 350,000,000 people, he had the future homes, livelihood and nationality of 88,000,000 of them to decide" (Mosley, 1966 p. 220). The history of border demarcation, particularly for the two provinces, Punjab and Bengal, became the most complex, arbitrary, resulting in mass migration, mayhem and violence. In this historical backdrop, the ontological disruption and psychological toll wreaked its havoc on many partition subjects: the contested belonging of these subjects not only challenged the territorial demarcation line, which is geo-politically a necessary condition for nation-formation, but also laid bare a violated collective psyche; the spatial rootedness or belonging of these subjects produced an existential anxiety and crisis, revealing deeply rooted socio-cultural contours. My argument in this paper, in particular reference to Narendranath Mitra's short story "The Four-Poster Bed", deals with the intricate and baffling complexity of the question of belonging along with its far-reaching socio-political and cultural implications as the resultant impact of the Partition of Bengal. The class positions of the characters, occupying a central space in the story, play out as such that it unravels underlying social subtexts and the conundrum of material belongings and rootedness.

Against the Tide: the Rootedness as a Route to Escape the Travail of Displacement

Narendranath Mitra's short story "The Four-Poster Bed"(Palonko), also adapted into an iconic film by the original Bengali name of the short story "Palonko" by Rajen Tarafdar in 1975, is set in the time, when the Hindus from East Bengal (East Pakistan), in particular, were emigrating into west Bengal (India) due to insecurity, deteriorating community relations, or a nascent fear of being Hindu minority in a Muslim majority newly-formed nation-state. The refugee influx into West Bengal from the East was entwined with class and caste identity, and unlike Punjab, the influx into Bengal (West) continued over the years; the first wave of refugee

influx into Bengal, by March 1948, swelled to 1.1 million, of whom "3,50000 belonged to urban middle classes, 5,50000 to the rural middle class, and a little over 1,00000 were agriculturalists and a little less than 1,00000 artisans" (Chakrabarty, 1990, p. 1). The second wave of migration began after 1950. The first wave of migration into Bengal, mainly of *Bhadralok* or urban middle-class, and other subjects, as pointed out, is not directly linked to "communal violence", but "a deliberate, sustained mental torture" (Chakrabarty, 1990, p. 6) led Hindus to migrate. Some of the Hindu refugees shared their concern about "how Muslims violated the sanctity of their homes and harassed their home-folk" (Chakrabarty, 1990, p. 6), as Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay illustrates in his book *Udvastu*. In such a conflicted period, Narendranath Mitra's "The Four-Poster Bed" sheds light upon a different slice of life which reversibly portrays the shared and inter-communal existence of Hindu and Muslim communities; and it exemplifies a case of landed gentry who did not budge an inch from his *vite* (foundational home), pointing to an intergenerational collective memories and rootedness intimately associated with such a nostalgic space.

Rajmohan Roy, in the short story, typifies the class of landed gentry who could hardly imagine leaving behind his ancestral home, land and property in Pakistan. As it reads, Rajmohan's son, Naren and his daughter-in-law, Asima, along with their children, had moved to Calcutta prior to the 1947 Partition. But he was living in a "big empty house" all alone, estranged from "his son and daughter-in-law and his grandchildren" (p. 49). Rajmohan's decision seems more eccentric than rational in the context, when all of his neighbours sold their properties and emigrated to West Bengal. In the letter addressed to Rajmohan, the ire of Asima for his father-in-law's imprudent decision to live in East Bengal is revealed: "The Banerjees, the Mukherjees, the Rahas, the Saha's, the Kundas, the Nandis are all here…The village must be practically deserted!" (p. 43). The pattern of the first wave of post-Partition migration into West Bengal, as noted, was mainly of the Hindu middle class or those having more or less privileged social position. This historical proposition is validated here in this literary narrative. Asima delineates that the neighbours of his age settled down in West Bengal and were flourishing with money and fortune; she lashed out against his impracticality. Given the social standing and economic privilege, Rajmohan could have easily shifted to Calcutta, where his own son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren were living. Rajmohan, although privileged with the "mobility capital" - "the bundles of assets, competences or dispositions" (Chatterji, 2013, p. 279)- did not emigrate to the other side of the border.

Such a rootedness to the land of his belonging sometimes came out in the form of uttermost miserliness. His protective nature regarding this space of belonging aroused ire among some of the neighbours, too. Maqbool, the Muslim neighbour and also a daily labourer, spoke of Rajmohan's extreme kind of miserliness to Yakub, the local chowkidar: "That stubborn old man is such a miser, brother. He is like a demon guarding his possessions… Because of him there is no chance of plucking fruit or picking some firewood from his orchard" (p. 48). The subconscious desire of grabbing hold of Rajmohan's property was revealed in Maqbool's euphemistic remark, "Who will live in that house once he closes his eyes, tell me? ...Let the old man close his eyes and I'll make his house a real Pakistan" (p. 48). So, the social milieu, as portrayed in the story, exposes a fractured community-relation, but amicable nonetheless.

This space- here not merely an inhabiting tract of land but *bastuvite* (foundational home)- foregrounds the bedrock of Rajmohan's collective and shared identity, which defines his ontic self. His rootedness could not be discarded as merely a trifling materialistic attachment of a stubborn old man, as Maqbool opined, or even his own daughter-in-law spoke out against it admonishingly. *Bastuvite* in Bengali connotes emotional, psychic, ontological and sacred resonances, and violation of it in any form or degree could lead to a psychic injury and ontological disruption as well, apart from its material damage. Here, the argument of Dipesh

Chakrabarty could shed insightful light on the spatial significance of *bastuvite*: "For the ability to maintain connections with one's *bastubhita* across generations is a sign of being fortunate, a fortune that itself owes something to the auspicious blessing of one's ancestors (p. 323); the failing of which is considered a "curse" (p. 323). Rajmohan lived in the present, but continued to carry forward the inherited sacred space of his forefathers with all of its inviolability as long as he could, notwithstanding the imminent threat of it being encroached upon by the neighbours in his absence. His over-possessiveness for this sacred space comes out of his collective, personal and shared history and memory inscribed in it. Such an enormity of spatial attachment could justify what prima facie appears to be a highly eccentric or stubborn behaviour. Asima, Rajmohan's daughter-in-law, wrote, "...we hear that… you'll not sell a twig, an inch from what is yours" (p. 43). However, Rajmohan's unwavering attachment and adherence to this geographical spatiality never waned; he also went to his son, Naren and his daughter-in-law, Asima, at Beleghata, Calcutta, where they were living in rented rooms from the pre-Partition period. Yet, he never planned to settle down there. In the pre-Partition period, Calcutta-centric immigration was a class character, especially for the middle class, or the privileged section, since then. Actually, the urban space of Calcutta was transformed into a coveted destination for the actualisation of middle-class aspiration and success, and there, they would find jobs and professional opportunities comparatively more easily. This aspirational dream had influenced him to such an extent that he had gone away. Rajmohan only brooded on how different his son had been. The rationale that defines Rajmohan's attitude to life was something outdated and impractical for his son. The discordance between them also betrays the bewildering and contradictory responses of the Partition subjects; there is one such Rajmohan, who, like a ghost, was guarding every nook and cranny of *bastuvite*, another like Suren, who was least bothered about the land of his birth. "His temperament, upbringing and education did not correlate with Rajmohan's views" (p. 56). He "cared nothing for all that his father valued for more than life- the ancestral home, the land, the paddy and jute fields, the plants, the trees and rivers of their birthplace" (p. 56). However, the ideological as well as intergenerational discordance between father and son vividly portrays Rahmohan's near-eccentric rootedness to this piece of land, his *bastuvite*.

Contrary to the flow of time, as the 1951 census in West Bengal indicates the extent of the refugee influx, i.e., "there were at least 3.5 million refugees in West Bengal" (Chakrabarty, 1990, p. 3), he symbolically stood up to the ravages of the Partition. His space of belonging is like an *élan vital* which sustained him, nurtured him and kept him alive in an altered geo-political reality in East Pakistan. His apparently eccentric decision to live alone in East Pakistan attains a symbolic proportion of singular resistance against socio-political ripples which gushed forth through the rupture of the Partition of Bengal.

The Four-Poster Bed- a Symbol of Dignity and Conflicted Belongings

The crisis in Rajmohan's life, which escalated into a question of identity, dignity, and pride of possession, began when his daughter-in-law, Asima, asked him to sell a four-poster bed and send the money to them in Calcutta. As it is narrated, the four-poster bed actually belonged to Asima— it was a wedding gift for Asima from her own grandfather; and "this fine piece of craftsmanship…made entirely of good teak" (p. 45) was kept in the house of Rajmohan. She wrote in the letter about their plight in Calcutta; the rooms they had rented were damp, and the floor was cold. Due to this unhealthy living condition, she wrote, especially his beloved grandchildren - Kanu, Tenu, Rina and Mina - were usually forced to sleep on the floor, and frequently they suffered from fever. So, she asked his father-in-law to sell it, and with that money, she could buy some cots for her children; and it became the bone of contention. On the one hand, there is the plight of the family of Rajmohan's son in Calcutta- a shocking but harsh reality for the tenants like Suren and his family, whose living condition and livelihood was severely affected and aggravated by the refugee influx into West Bengal just after the Partition.

On the other hand, the four-poster bed- the only material object connected with memories of his son and daughter-in-law- put him in a dire dilemma to sell it. In addition to such affective ties with this object, it hurt his feudal pride because he had "never sold a tree, a bamboo stick, or even a sheaf of straw because that would have hurt his prestige" (p. 49). His daughter-in-law's pleading infuriated him, and on the spur of the moment, he sold this for the meagre sum of 50 rupees to Maqbool, who was a temporary labourer and a Muslim neighbour. He was dependent on Rajmohan's discretion and was usually called upon for different kinds of work at his house.

When Rajmohan mulled over selling such an invaluable family possession, he felt cheated. The materiality of the four-poster bed, after it was disposed of, sparked a simmering tension between material belonging and memory, the feudal pride and the rupture of this by its dispossession. He was enormously affected by this loss, as this material belonging was a portal into the past—a metonymic alternative to the pre-Partition period of his authority and affluence. Its dispossession entailed a symbolic injury to his *maan* (dignity); it was a tangible belonging intertwined with his memories of the past and a material reminder of the presence of his son and daughter-in-law. But the empty space of the east room deeply afflicted him with a piercing pain. The tangible presence of everything he was surrounded by roused his intangible memories, evoked in him, simultaneously, a nostalgic yearning to have everything brought back and the realisation of its sheer impossibility. When Rajmohan came into the east room- where the four-poster bed had filled the space over the years, he recalled it. Suren and Asima had used the room whenever they had come home on holidays. "He was overwhelmed with a feeling of utter loneliness" (p. 51). Everyone left him; his wife, Sarala, died ten years ago; "he also remembered the pain of separation from his beloved son and daughter-in-law and the grandchildren" (p. 51). The visceral remembrance enacts the past in the present with a traumatic underpinning; its belated return continues to devastate the psychic condition of Rajmohan.

The dispossession of the four-poster bed did not end up with Rajmohan's affective responses only; it became a contested site of rivalry that culminated in the form of a symbolic warfare of honour and prestige- between Rajmohan's *maan* or dignity, which stood for his feudal lineage and Maqbool's rigidity not to lose it even at the highest sacrifice. This rivalry between two eccentric individuals also unfolds the positional authority, which was exercised by people like Rajmohan for their class and social privilege. It also portrays the marginal status of Maqbool, putting him in the socio-economic periphery.

After realising that he had eaten "food off the mud to spite the thief" (p. 50), Rajmohan went to Maqbool's hut to bring back the four-poster bed. He offered him fifty-five rupees, adding an extra five rupees. But Maqbool declined. It was, in effect, a declaration of war against Rajmohan. When the news of the sale of the four-poster bed spread in the village, the neighbours thronged into Rajmohan's house. It not only surprised but also confounded them with the thought of how a man like Rajmohan, who never sold even "a sheaf of straw", had "given away that elegant and expensive four-poster bed for the meagre sum of fifty rupees" (p. 49). Sharat Shill, Muraru Mandel, Gedu Munshi, Chadan Mridha and others, who held him in high esteem, sympathised with Rajmohan. Chadan Mridha- a prosperous Muslim farmer in the locality- expressed his deep desire, "Cupboards, chairs, tables, trunks- if you decide to sell anything at all, Karta, please let me know first. I'll pay immediate cash and the right price" (p. 49). The visceral response, which was immediately followed, grapples with Rajmohan's affective ties with every material object of the house: "You leave my house, at once…you can take away and enjoy whatever you want after I die" (p. 49). This outburst of rage was not simply an outcome of his wounded ego but a fear of dispossession of the objects, and a fear of erasure of collective memories embodied within these tangible objects. Rajmohan always cherished the past and nurtured an innate existential and ontological tie with everything around him. Every material object for him "serves as a catalyst for memory, a trigger for remembering

as well as a portal into the past" (Malhotra, 2018, p. 24). In such a context, even to imagine selling any object in his house would be a sacrilegious thought.

Rajmohan tried every possible means to convince Maqbool to return the four-poster bed. But he was a hard nut to crack. Even his beneficiaries, including some lower caste Hindus like Sharat Shil, Murari Mandal, Phatik Karmakar, Nibaran Rajak and Muslims like Chadan Mridha, Badan Sikdar, and Gedu Munshi, approached Maqbool to convince him to give back the four-poster bed. He was too obstinate to comply with their request. However, Gedu Munshi's words, here, underscore a communal harmony and collective coexistence, despite the underlying hierarchical positions and religious divide, as existed in the period. He said,

> You have not behaved well with Karta. All the Hindu gentlemen have gone away but Karta has not left us. He has not severed the bonds of our relationship …We till his land, visit his house, come to him in need (p. 55).

Apart from this, there were "no more high caste Hindus in the neighbourhood. Those who remained were of the lower castes, dark-skinned" (p. 55). This literary description also points to a historical fact of early migration of "urban and rural middle classes…in all probability, …three bhadralok upper castes, i.e. Brahman, Kayastha, and Baidya" (Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2022, pp. 61-62).

In this critical juncture, Rajmohan devised ways to harm him; it was far more than a mere retaliation but a soft strategy to compel him to return the four-poster bed. This rivalry exposes the socio-economic privilege and power that the upper-caste elite or Hindu *bhadralok* had over the marginal subjects. Although there is no such prominent discordance between the master-servant binary in the story, the marginalised status of the Hindu lower caste and Muslim subjects illustrates the rising tension between the Hindu *bhadralok* or upper-caste elite, and lower caste Hindus and Muslims. Rajmohan stands for "'Babu'- a badge of bhadralok status-carried with it, connotation of Hindu, frequently upper-caste exclusiveness, of landed wealth, of being master (as opposed to servant) …." (Chatterji, 2025, p. 5). He started to impose sanctions on him: "He used to buy half a ser of milk from Maqbool daily. He started getting the daily from Wahen instead. When he hired farm labour, Maqbool was always the first to be called; the practice was stopped" (pp. 57-58). Such sanctions continued for a few days. He finally gave up his stubborn ways of harassing Maqbool. He relinquished his excessive material attachment. He quietly sat on the temple platforms where "the idols of Radha and Govinda were installed" (62). He prayed, "Merciful lord, please remove the bonds of my worldly desires… Let my greed and passion, my pain and humiliation mingle in the red dust of Vraja, the playground of your love" (p. 63). Maqbool also recognised his mistake. Rajmohan's feudal pride and Maqbool's stubbornness were replaced by a mutual sympathy and self-recognition. At the end of the story, Rajmohan, in his illness, went to the house of Maqbool just to have a glimpse of the four-poster bed; and when returning, Maqbool escorted Rajmohan to his house, holding kerosene lamps over their heads, and told him, "Karta…take the four-poster back" (p. 67). "… the two lovers of the four-poster bed- two men of different creeds, two men of different complexions…stared at each other speechlessly" (p. 66).

Conclusion

The fictive treatment of the impact of the Partition in this short story, "The Four-Poster Bed", evocatively represents a disruption- psychic and ontological- unravelling the socio-economic undercurrents in the post-Partition scenario in East Pakistan. Rajmohan, who is the central protagonist in the story, defines the notion of belonging through its multiple underpinnings in the post-Partition context. First, we observe his rootedness to the foundational home- the spatial belonging, conceived and deeply nurtured in his psychic imagination. Whenever his close ties with it seem to be in trouble or threatened, his existential condition is deeply

perturbed. It is because Rajmohan's ontological identity is interlinked with the space, and space, as Doreen B. Massey (2005) argues, is "a product of interrelations…identities/entities, the relations 'between' them, and the spatiality which is part of them are all co-constitutive" (pp. 9-10). And this belonging has not been compromised as he did not leave his foundational home despite the looming crisis, set in the post-Partition period in East Pakistan. Secondly, the function of material belongings- the four-poster bed- is articulated in an enigmatic way, grappling with Rajmohan's loss of *maan* (dignity) and the fear of dispossession of a tangible object connected with the memories of his son and daughter-in-law. The interaction between these- one spatial and another material belonging/s- unravels caste, class and religious dynamics too.

References

Bandopadhyay, H. (2025). *Udvastu.* Deep Prakashan.

Bandyopadhyay, S., & Basu Ray Chaudhury, A. (2022). *Caste and Partition in Bengal: The Story of Dalit Refugees, 1946–1961.* Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Greenwood Press.

Chakrabarty, D. (1998). Remembered Villages: Representations of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition. In D. A. Low & H. Brasted (Eds.), *Freedom, Trauma, Continuities: Northern India and Independence* (pp. 318–337). Sage.

Chakrabarti, P. K. (1990). *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*. Lumière Books.

Chatterji, J. (2013). Dispositions and Destinations: Refugee Agency and "Mobility Capital" in the Bengal Diaspora, 1947-2007. *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 55(2), 273–304. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23526382.

---. (2025). *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947.* Cambridge University Press.

Malhotra, A. (2018). *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory*. HarperCollins.

Massey, D. (2005). *For Space.* Sage.

Mosley, L. (1966). *The Last Days of the British Raj.* Jaico Publishing House.

Mitra, N. (2021). The Four-Poster Bed (T. Mukherjee, Trans.). In A. Bhalla (Ed.), *Stories about the Partition of India (*Vols. 1–3, pp. 41–67). Manohar Publishers.

Pandey, G. (2001). *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India.* Cambridge University Press.

Spivak, G. C. (2019). *Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching.* Oxford University Press.

Bio-note

Rajib Das is currently teaching as a state-aided college teacher in the Department of English at Prabhat Kumar College and is pursuing a PhD in Partition and Trauma Studies at the Department of English, Bankura University. He has presented papers at national and international seminars and conferences and has published articles in journals and edited volumes. His research interests include Indian classical literature, Bhasha literature, and musicology. An avid reader, he is also a connoisseur and practitioner of the performing arts, including music and elocution.

Email ID: rdeng1989@gmail.com